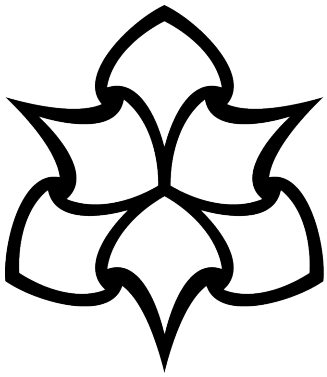

Leisure Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rlst20

Beyond integration: football as a mobile, transnational sphere of belonging for refugee-background young people

Caitlin Nunn, Ramón Spaaij & Carla Luguetti

To cite this article: Caitlin Nunn, Ramón Spaaij & Carla Luguetti (2021): Beyond integration: football as a mobile, transnational sphere of belonging for refugee-background young people, Leisure Studies, DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2021.1962393

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2021.1962393

Published online: 12 Aug 2021.

LEISURE STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2021.1962393

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Beyond integration: football as a mobile, transnational sphere of belonging for refugee-background young people

Caitlin Nunn[a], Ramón Spaaij[b,c] and Carla Luguetti[b]

[a]Manchester Centre for Youth Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; [b]Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia; [c]Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Sport is widely utilised as an integration tool for refugee-background young people in resettlement countries, with a concomitant research focus on the implementation and outcomes of health and integration initiatives. However, a narrow focus on integration as the context and outcome of sport participation limits our understanding of the wider role sport plays as a sphere of belonging for refugee-background young people. By taking a wider view of football that includes fandom, informal participation, and community sport, we can gain important insights into how it functions as a mobile, transnational sphere of belonging that can, for some, provide a continuous sense of embodied, affective, practical, and sociocultural belonging in the face of multiple migrations and transitions. Drawing on three ethnographic and participatory studies conducted with refugee-background young people in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Netherlands, this article explores the ways in which engagement with football both precedes and exceeds integration in the everyday lives of refugee-background young people. The authors demonstrate the need to place instrumental sports-based integration approaches in a wider transnational and historical context, and to attend to the wider affordances of sport for refugee-background young people.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 April 2021
Accepted 21 July 2021

KEYWORDS
Integration; belonging; young people; sport; refugees; forced migration

Introduction

Outcomes of refugee resettlement are commonly evaluated through the lens of 'integration': a governmental framework premised on linear progression towards full participation in the resettlement country (Nunn et al., 2017). At its most liberal, integration is conceived as 'a dynamic two-way process that places demands on both the refugee and the receiving community' (UNHCR, 2013, p. 8). However, in many countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Netherlands, there tends to be a narrow focus on measurable, policy-relevant dimensions of experience such as education and employment, and an expectation that it is refugees themselves (and migrants more broadly) who must undertake the labour of 'fitting in' to existing institutional and sociocultural spheres (e.g. Schinkel, 2018).

Sport and leisure are not immune to this instrumentalisation. The UK's *Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework 2019* explicitly recognises leisure as a marker and means of integration (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019). According to the authors, leisure activities can help newly arrived migrants 'learn more about the culture of a country or local area, and can provide opportunities

CONTACT Caitlin Nunn c.nunn@mmu.ac.uk Manchester Centre for Youth Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, Geoffrey Manton Building, Rosamond St West, Manchester M15 6BH, UK

to establish social connections, practice language skills and improve overall individual health and wellbeing' (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019, p. 38). This builds on a history of research into sport as a pathway to integration for refugee-background young people in resettlement countries (Amara et al., 2004; Gibbs & Block, 2017; Ley et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2019; Spaaij, 2012). While this research provides a valuable evidence base for refugee sports programmes, with few exceptions (notably in this journal, e.g. Mata-Codesal et al., 2015; Spaaij, 2015), pursuit of policy relevance has constrained the scope of research into the wider role and value of sport in the lives of refugee-background young people.

At issue here is not only an instrumental understanding of sport participation but also a narrow geographic and temporal focus on the initial period of resettlement in the receiving society. Forced migrants lead transnational lives, which means it is reductive to describe their lives only in terms of integration or belonging in a destination country. (Saharso, 2019). Furthermore, Schinkel (2018, p. 3) argues that the effect of using integration uncritically in policy and research is that it 'becomes a decidedly un-social and non-relational concept', which posits 'society' as a static object vis-à-vis 'individuals whose being signifies a certain degree of "integration" as an individual-level trait'. What is lost in such a myopic approach is the diversity and fluidity of belonging and sports engagement among refugee-background young people across time and place.

This article applies a conceptual framework of (non)belonging that attends to football's capacity to provide – for some refugee-background young people – a continuous sense of embodied, affective, practical, and sociocultural connection in the face of multiple migrations and transitions (Dukic et al., 2017; Harwood et al., 2020; Spaaij, 2015). Drawing on three ethnographic and participatory studies conducted with refugee-background young people in the UK, Australia, and the Netherlands – and taking a wider view of football that includes fandom, community sport, and 'kicking around' – this article conceptualises football as a mobile, transnational sphere of belonging. In placing football engagement among refugee-background young people in this wider context, it not only provides insights into a broader range of practices, values and outcomes, but also enables us to better understand the affective, embodied and sociocultural factors that contribute to the role of sport as an integration tool.

(Non)belonging

Belonging is a frequent casualty of forced migration. Historical, practical, affective, embodied, and sociocultural connections are lost, ruptured, or stigmatised as people are displaced from their homes, neighbourhoods, communities, and countries (Correa-Velez et al., 2010). Subsequent movement across national borders shapes relations of (non)belonging with new places, communities, and institutions that are often hostile and precarious (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020). Thus, (re)creating and strengthening relations of belonging is a critical aspect of resettlement. Drawing on and extending the work of theorists of belonging including Yuval-Davis (2011) and May (2013), we conceptualise (non)belonging as 'a dynamic process of establishing, maintaining and transforming relations with and attachments to people, places, practices, and institutions' (Nunn, 2018). While (non)belonging is most often conceived as an emotional connection (May, 2013), we propose that it additionally encompasses other forms of attachment, both objective and subjective, including formal, practical, embodied, ethical, sociocultural, and historical (Nunn, 2014). Cumulatively, these multiple forms of attachment shape a person's overall sense of belonging in any given sphere.

(Non)belonging occurs at multiple scales of experience from local to global. Different spheres of (non)belonging frequently intersect, such that one can augment or inhibit another (Yuval-Davis, 2011). As a relational process, (non)belonging involves both seeking (or rejecting) and granting (or excluding). As such, it is mediated by both the desires and resources of those seeking to belong and the politics that govern to whom belonging is granted (Yuval-Davis, 2011). While generally framed as a positive relation, belonging can also be negative, including interpellation into a sphere that one

neither identifies with nor values (Anthias, 2009). Moreover, belonging is rarely absolute. More frequently, we are located within a hierarchy of belonging in a given sphere (Back et al., 2012) – hence the necessary insertion of '(non)' in our conceptualising of (non)belonging.

(Non)belonging is a complex matter for resettled refugee-background young people. Migrating in childhood or adolescence, often having spent at least part of their childhood in exile, these young people are negotiating multiple, at times conflicting, (non)belongings at multiple scales of experience and in contexts of often-acute flux. A study by Nunn (2018) with refugee-background young people resettled in regional cities in the UK and Australia found that they were navigating relations and attachments across eight broad spheres of belonging: family; friendship and recreation; education and employment; ethnic community and culture; religion; local community, culture and place; homelands and countries of asylum; and the resettlement country. In this context, it is clear that the complexity of refugee-background youth experiences transcends the capacity of integration as both a policy and a concept. Applying (non)belonging as a more nuanced conceptual resource enables us to attend to the affective, embodied, sociocultural, and practical significance of sport for many refugee-background young people, demonstrating that, as a sphere of (non)belonging, it both precedes and succeeds – and also exceeds – integration.

Belonging, sport, and forced migration

Previous research has explored how sport can impact belonging for young people trying to identify with a new society, through processes of both inclusion and exclusion (Baker-Lewton et al., 2017; Harwood et al., 2020; Jeanes et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2019; Spaaij, 2015; Stone, 2018). Spaaij (2015), for example, has demonstrated how community sport functions as a site for negotiating belonging for Somali refugee-background youth in Australia. He highlighted the multi-layered, dynamic and situational nature of this belonging, and the multiple boundary shifts it requires, arguing that while social boundaries such as clan, team and locality are porous, other boundaries of inclusion/exclusion, notably gender, ethnicity and religion, tend to be more stable and more difficult to cross for this group in community football clubs. In a similar vein, Baker-Lewton et al. (2017) revealed the potential for sports clubs to be sites of exclusion, narrating experiences of everyday racism in a predominantly South Sudanese refugee-background team in Australia.

Of particular importance within the context of this article is the gendered nature of refugee-background young people's (non)belongings within sporting spaces. Most of the empirical data reported in this article focuses on the experiences of refugee-background young men rather than young women's experiences; an important exception is the data from Football Empowerment discussed later in the article. Research shows that refugee-background young women often face additional barriers to sport participation, such as constraining norms and expectations within their country of origin and/or their ethno-cultural or religious communities (Spaaij et al., 2019). Yet, when young women do participate in sport, they have been shown to experience this as a 'place of refuge' from the strains of life (Walseth, 2006), or as a space to construct their cultural identities (Palmer, 2009) and gain respect from male peers (Luguetti et al., 2021).

Mobile spheres of belonging that move with young people or are accessible transnationally take on particular significance within the context of forced migration. Previous research, which focuses predominantly on participation in sports clubs or interventions (Spaaij et al., 2019), has provided some insight into these two features (mobility and transnationality/translocality). A case in point is Dukic et al.'s (2017) ethnographic study of a football team of people seeking asylum in Australia, which highlights the players' pre-migration football engagement as a source of belonging to the game itself, regardless of where in the world (and in which format) they subsequently play it. Yet, this football engagement extends well beyond participation in clubs or programmes. While local (non)belongings mediate opportunities to play football in formal and community settings in displacement and resettlement, the everyday practice of kicking around – individually or in small groups; in yards, on streets, or in parks – provides an opportunity for embodied, affective belonging

that is accessible and affordable. As Lewis (2015, p. 53) writes in relation to dancing: 'While forced migrants may have little opportunity to bring material goods, all come with their bodies and the competencies of bodily praxis'. Engaging in the familiar practice of kicking a football around can provide a sense of mastery and control, as well as pleasure and freedom, in the midst of the uncertainty and alienation of migration (Spracklen et al., 2015; see also De Martini Ugolotti, 2020 with regard to music groups). Moreover, it can provide an embodied and affective connection to the past, offering a sense of continuity in the face of significant changes (Dukic et al., 2017).

The 'micro-social moments' that emerge through the shared practice of kicking a ball around hold transformative potential (McDonald et al., 2019). Football is a rare sphere of belonging for refugee-background young people where bodily capital and affective investment hold primacy over formal belonging to the nation state and local sociocultural belonging. Moreover, the informal nature of kicking around, unmediated by governments or institutions, facilitates the co-production of socio-spatial practice by refugee-background and other local young people (De Martini Ugolotti, 2015). That is not to say that hierarchies of belonging do not exist in these encounters. However, it is important to recognise their potential to temporarily diminish social distance and to build the capacity of refugee-background young people to claim their belonging. Kicking around, and playing informal games in community spaces, also has the potential to foster a sense of place belonging in urban settings where many routinely face hostility and exclusion. Football provides a means of placing bodies that are often considered *out* of place *in* place through the performance of a recognisable and socially valued activity (De Martini Ugolotti, 2015; Mata-Codesal et al., 2015).

Not bound to place or reliant on material resources beyond access to a radio, television, or internet connection, football fandom is of significant affective value to some forced migrants, providing a much-needed sense of continuity and familiarity (Smets, 2018). Football fandom and team identification are activities and communities that can be accessed anywhere, that remain consistent and intelligible across cultural and linguistic contexts, and that are not reliant on local inclusion (Stanfill & Valdivia, 2017). Numerous studies of football fandom have highlighted the increasingly transnational nature of fandom and team identification, which has been aided by the globalisation of media, the rise and accessibility of internet platforms, and the global marketing of major European teams (Stanfill & Valdivia, 2017; Theodorakis et al., 2019; Wann et al., 2017). Identification with non-local teams is often intense and long-lasting, supporting both short- and long-term social connections with local fans and global imagined communities, and 'satisfy[ing] a need for affiliation and belonging' (Theodorakis et al., 2019, p. 244). As an elective sphere of belonging, fandom can provide respite for young people from the imposed and defining category of 'refugee' (Zetter, 2007). Moreover, the propensity to follow highly successful teams means that it is a positive, celebratory sphere of belonging in the midst of much loss and uncertainty. Thus, for refugee-background young people, and for migrants more generally, football is not only valuable as a sphere of belonging in itself but also as a resource for belonging across nations and localities, fostering a synergistic relationship between integration and transnationalism (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). Despite being premised on the 'weak associations and simple acquaintances' (Wann et al., 2017, p. 102) that signification of fandom (e.g. team colours) might generate, it can nonetheless elicit wellbeing benefits and support a sense of belonging.

Materials and methods

This article draws on three ethnographic and participatory studies conducted in three countries between 2015 and 2019.[1] While the studies have diverse aims and approaches, they share a focus on the lived experiences of refugee-background young people, including their engagement with football, and a methodological concern with privileging the perspectives of these young people.

Drawing on data and findings from these studies enables us to demonstrate the role that football can play as a mobile, transnational sphere of belonging in the lives of refugee-background young people from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds and forced migration contexts, and in a range of

resettlement locations. It also allows us to attend to the differences that arise, including, for example, in relation to intersections of gender, religion and ethnicity; emerging versus established resettlement locations; and local and national policy contexts. Addressing these commonalities and complexities is critical given the diversity of young people co-located under the bureaucratic label of 'refugee youth', and the attendant risks of either essentialising their unique attributes and experiences or obscuring those that they share (Malkki, 1995; Zetter, 2007). In presenting the results, this article utilises a narrative approach that draws attention to the complexities of refugee-background youth (non)belongings (Riessman, 2011). The authors met several times in preparing this article, to share insights from their respective studies, to identify shared findings, and to collaboratively conceptualise football as a mobile, transnational sphere of belonging. Each author then drew on their own data to compose narratives that exemplify the range of ways in which refugee-background young people understand and experience this belonging.

Participants in the three studies were aged between 14 and 24, and were either (former) refugees or children of first-generation refugee-background parents. The third study, conducted by Spaaij, also involved older participants who were coaches and community leaders with refugee backgrounds. Participants came from a range of ethnocultural backgrounds including Somali, Syrian, Kurdish, Sudanese, Eritrean, and Burundian, and had a range of experiences of forced migration including, in some cases, extended periods in refugee camps and urban displacement locations. As resettled refugee-background young people, they had in common the negotiation of multiple spheres of belonging, including to local, ethnic, and transnational communities, as well as the at times competing pressures to maintain a connection with their family's culture of origin and to 'integrate' into the receiving society – all while managing the legacies of their own and their families' forced migration and facing structural and interpersonal discrimination and exclusion (Correa-Velez et al., 2010, 2015; Nunn et al., 2017). (Table 1) summarises the three studies, and we discuss each study below.

Dispersed Belongings

Dispersed Belongings was a participatory arts-based research (PABR) project that explored belonging among refugee-background young people resettled in regional cities in Australia and the UK (Nunn, 2018). The focus here is on Syrian and Kurdish Syrian young people in Gateshead, North East England. Gateshead is a small city and local authority district in North East England. It is much less diverse than England and Wales more generally and has only recently commenced resettling refugees in significant numbers, pledging to resettle 550 people through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme by 2020. Twelve Syrian and four Kurdish Syrian young people (four female, 12 male) participated in the study. They had lived in Gateshead for between three and 15 months and arrived aged 14 to 24 years.

Table 1. Summary of the three ethnographic and participatory studies.

Study	Sport context	Field site	Participants	Methods
Dispersed Belongings	Sport and recreation (in the wider context of belonging)	Gateshead, UK	12 Syrian and 4 Kurdish Syrian young people aged 15–24 (4 female, 12 male)	• participatory arts project (music, visual art) • semi-structured interviews • artist diaries • field notes
Football Empowerment	Community sport	Melbourne, Australia	12 African Australian young women aged 14–24, and 4 coaches aged 25 and above	• observations/field notes • collaborative meetings • photovoice • generated artefacts • focus groups
Amsterdam Futsal Tournament	Community-driven sport event	Amsterdam, Netherlands	34 Somali young people aged 14–24, and 15 community members aged 25 and above	• observations/field notes • semi-structured interviews • digital ethnography

The project was conducted in partnership with local councils and refugee, ethnic and arts organisations and was delivered by Nunn in collaboration with local community artists. The approach centred on a participatory art project in which young people collaborated with local artists to produce works exploring their sense of belonging, which were presented in an exhibition in each field site. It also involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with youth artist-researchers both pre-and post-arts project, ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews with project artists and representatives from partner organisations, and participatory evaluation activities. In Gateshead, data was collected with support from Arabic-speaking interpreters.

As a PABR project, the specific spheres of belonging explored in Dispersed Belongings were identified through dialogue and art-making with the youth artist-researchers. Within the broad sphere of 'friendship and recreation', football emerged as important to a sense of belonging for many young people – and particularly young men – including in formal and informal participation, 'kicking around' in local neighbourhoods, following a professional team, and playing FIFA video games (Nunn, 2018).

Football Empowerment

Football Empowerment is a charity organisation's football programme in Melbourne's West. The programme was established in 2016 by a group of refugee-background young men. Motivated by their passion for football and their intention to give back to their community, they founded the programme with the aim to improve the health and wellbeing of young people and to develop youth leaders who can contribute to the social inclusion of their ethno-cultural community. Football Empowerment accommodates approximately 250 children and young people across three groups (under-14-year-old boys; young men aged 16–21; and girls and young women aged 14–25).

We undertook participatory action research (PAR) with a group of twelve African Australian refugee-background young women and four coaches in the programme. The young women attempted to form a team to enter competitive tournaments and leagues, and they used a local club [Albion] as their clubhouse. Lughetti facilitated the co-creation of the sport programme to better address their needs by using a Student-Centered Inquiry as Curriculum (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) approach. This process included a *Building the Foundation* phase followed by a four-phase cyclical process of planning, responding to young people, listening to responses, and analysing responses (*Activist Phase*) as the basis of all content and pedagogical decisions. The intention was for participants to feel empowered and motivated to participate constructively in their development because their voices are both sought and responded to. This required collective, mutual action and reflection on the part of both the researcher and the participants (for more information see Luguetti et al., 2020; Luguetti et al., 2021).

Amsterdam Futsal Tournament

The third study was conducted at the Amsterdam Futsal Tournament (AFT), a diasporic leisure event that is organised by Dutch Somalis to foster ties with countries and communities of origin and destination. The event was established in 2005 by the Himilo Relief and Development Association (HIRDA), a non-profit organisation founded by members of the Somali community in the Netherlands to contribute to the development of Somalia and the global Somali diaspora. AFT is held in Amsterdam twice a year, featuring indoor football (futsal) teams of predominantly Somali background representing various European countries and cities, such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Switzerland, and the UK.

The study was co-designed with HIRDA and Dutch Somali community leaders. It employed and trained a Dutch Somali community worker, a young man in his mid-20s, as a co-researcher. Data were collected before, during and after the AFT event in 2015, and supplemented with follow-up

data. The study combined participant observation, face-to-face interviews, and digital ethnography of event-related social media (Spaaij & Broerse, 2019). (Non)belonging and identity comprised central components of the study. The interview questions and observation protocol were co-designed to capture the young people's perceptions, experiences and behaviours concerning (non)belonging across various spheres, including sport and recreation, family, education, employment, ethnic/religious community, homelands, and resettlement country. Particular attention was paid to their experiences of sports engagement in general, and AFT in particular.

Results

The narratives below exemplify the breadth and depth of football engagement among many refugee-background young people. They demonstrate its affective, embodied, and sociocultural significance across time, place, and communities, and its continuity as a sphere of belonging in the context of the profound changes wrought by forced migration. Football is defined here as one (dynamic, loosely bounded) sphere of belonging that incorporates everything that young people call football – from fandom to kicking a ball with friends, from integration initiatives to club-based participation. While academic attention to football engagement among refugee-background young people almost always commences with resettlement and integration, many of these young people have a deep and long-standing relationship with the sport, as both players and fans. Indeed, it is this pre-existing attachment to football that renders it so effective as an integration activity. But it is also what calls us to attend to football's significance as a sphere of belonging beyond integration.

Dispersed Belongings: global fandom and translocal belonging

As a small child growing up in Syria, Ishaq would hear his father sitting in front of a football match on the television, 'shouting all the night'. By the time he was in year three of school, he was a fan of FC Barcelona, wearing the team socks and shoes. Later, he became a Real Madrid fan – a passion he has carried with him through flight from Syria and several years' displacement in Lebanon. Aged 15 and recently resettled in North East England, he watched Real Madrid matches in a bedroom adorned with posters of Ronaldo.

For Ishaq, who had recently arrived in the UK and was struggling to fit into a neighbourhood where he was abused and excluded by local young people and a school where he had little educational and linguistic support and faced significant racism, Real Madrid was an important sphere of positive belonging. When he spoke of their successes he included himself in the collective 'we' ('we won last night!'), explaining: 'if someone scores you feel you score'. It additionally facilitated the practice of watching football with his father, supporting the continuation of a valued ritual of family belonging. At the same time, the global language of team identification and fandom also opened up possibilities for establishing local connections. The signification of allegiance, including via displaying team colours or logos and discussing or publicly watching football, rendered Ishaq visible to other fans as sharing belonging in this sphere.

Alongside watching football, Ishaq, and many of the other young Syrian and Kurdish Syrian men settling in Gateshead, were avid players. Given their recent arrival in the UK, at the time of the research they were yet to engage with local clubs. However, they took the opportunity to play wherever they could, including an informal weekly match at the college where post-school-age young people attended English classes, a programme set up by the local council as part of their resettlement support services, and – most commonly – kicking a ball around in local streets and parks. For Ishaq, kicking a football against a wall near his house was initially a way of passing the time when he did not have any friends; of seeking comfort in, and entertainment from the familiar bodily practice of football. At times, this drew negative attention. Ishaq said: 'The people around in that area who are the same age as me, they are not friendly. They spit, so I ignore them'. However, over time, Ishaq's practice of kicking the ball around his neighbourhood also drew more positive attention from younger kids on the street: 'All the children in this street, all of them like

football, so we always play football. If we didn't play football, I wouldn't see them.' Through the shared practice of kicking the ball, Ishaq and the children on his street have been able to establish a way of belonging together.

As with fandom, this bodily practice of kicking a ball around created an opening for new encounters and relations – in this case in quite a hostile environment. It facilitated recognition of co-location in a shared sphere of belonging, which in turn served as a resource for new ways of belonging in other spheres such as local place and community. Yet, the potential of this opening was not always realised. As Ishaq acknowledged, the relationship existed only through the shared practice of football and did not transcend it. Moreover, it did not extend to the older kids: 'I still don't have that relation with them. They don't spit on me. They have stopped that, but they are not friends of mine.' Other young men reported similarly bounded engagement with long-term local young people. Hassan described his local friendships as follows: 'We play together at football. Just playing football. We play together, and then we disperse'.

'We are a family': Football Empowerment

Eban was born in a refugee camp in Tanzania, the only African country he has ever visited. He spent years in a refugee camp with his parents, who are from Burundi, before moving to Australia. He is the oldest in a family of seven siblings, and the only sibling who was born outside Australia. Eban, a full-time student, loves football and has played football for most of his life, nearly for two decades. He has played at all levels, including semi-professional for a very long time in Australia. Among his variegated community work, his favourite activism is as a coach with Football Empowerment, which he co-founded in 2016 with his best friend Ted to give a platform to African Australian young people with a love for football:

> Football Empowerment started as a kick around the park . . . kicking the ball around and other friends used to kind of drop-in . . . kicking the ball around on a Friday then it became Sunday, we started playing friendlies against each other and then we started having discussion on making this like an every week sort of thing.

The kicking around evolved into a community-driven programme where football became part of a wider sphere of belonging, facilitating encounters and relationships between young people from different African backgrounds. The kicking around with 10–15 African Australian young people became a programme catering for 250 children and young people. For Eban and his participants, the programme provides a pan-African 'family', and a valuable safe space in the local community:

> You can see like friends . . . we just brought all Africans, we have not had an event like that where it brings all people from Africa together and it's just football . . . it was just the passion they had, to be as one as a community. And just the whole care value about the community.

Eban's and the other coaches' commitment to facilitating a sense of pan-African belonging for African Australian young people is not limited to Football Empowerment. It is also evident in multicultural events they organise, such as an African Nations Cup tournament and an Africa's Got Talent competition. In the annual African Nations Cup, Eban proudly represents the Burundi team, and his entire family volunteer to organise the tournament.

Research shows that belonging in football is often not equally available to refugee-background men and women (Luguetti et al., 2021; Spaaij, 2012). Eban is keenly aware of this and seeks to address this gender inequality by coaching the young women's team. He has four sisters playing in the team and it is one of the reasons he has chosen to specifically focus his attention on the young women. Eban acknowledges that communities are always very male-dominated, and he wants to go 'against this flow'. He believes that women always outperform the men when they are given the opportunity to do so. Taking a strengths-based approach, he wants to give as much space and attention to the women as possible so they can reach their full potential in the game:

> The guys have to be driven whereas the women drive themselves to establish certain things and when they want to run something the idea comes from them. The young women have always been self-driven and they've shown us qualities that are neglected and should be embraced and really cherished, and also whenever the women's aspect of Football Empowerment is active a lot of the results are seen and they're not always football related, they're very family orientated, very community orientated and we just love to see that, because that's what we want from them, we want them to make them feel as they belong, to have the ability to also establish themselves in a community and be seen as contributors in a community and not just receivers.

Eban's commitment to giving back to the community stems from a strong lived experience of struggles he faced growing up as a refugee-background young person in Australia. He wants to use sport as a way to make young women feel that they belong. If Football Empowerment is his family, all young women are his sisters. His younger sister Makenna summed up this sense of belonging as follows:

> One of the most amazing ways in which Football Empowerment helps people is by providing connections and networks to the wider community. For example, it was through Football Empowerment that Alness United FC was able to establish a state league senior women's team this year. Also, many of the young people (including myself) have used Football Empowerment coaches or officials as reference for employment opportunities training . . . And lastly, Football Empowerment helps people create long-term relationships. For me, personally, Football Empowerment has helped me to see people who are different to me in a new light. I have met new people and I have created great bonds with many of the young people there.

Makenna's comments illustrate how she perceived Football Empowerment as a safe space that brought people together, providing them a platform to be active and part of a (diverse) community.

Moving with the ball: Amsterdam Futsal Tournament

When Abdirahman arrived in the Netherlands, one of the first things he did was to locate a football club in his new place of residence. As a child, back in Somalia, he had played vigorously with his friends in the streets (just like Ishaq, mentioned earlier). But only in an informal capacity, just kicking around, because where he grew up there were no formal sports opportunities like the ones he came to experience post-resettlement. His transition to a club was fraught with challenges. Abdirahman barely spoke Dutch, knew no one at the club, and had never played football on grass. 'I didn't know anyone, I just walked into the canteen and asked if I could sign up', he recalls. Later, when he moved to another town and got a job, he stopped playing club football. Instead, he became a regular participant in multicultural events such as the Amsterdam World Cup. He still kicks around with friends in the park regularly and is a stalwart player in AFT. Abdirahman's trajectory thus reveals co-existing modes of engagement with football, ranging from informal play to structured club competitions.

Abdirahman's story is typical of that of many of the refugee-background young men who compete in AFT, in the sense that they were introduced to the game of football at an early age, casually playing in the streets in their homeland or in refugee camps. 'Moving with the ball' (Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001) marked a significant continuity throughout their migration journeys. Although they are often considered in their countries of resettlement as newcomers who need to be socialised into mainstream football engagement (i.e. club participation), they are by no means newcomers to the sport. Indeed, football is an important component of the embodied histories of many players (Dukic et al., 2017). Pre-migration football engagement is regarded with fondness and elicits feelings of belonging to the game itself, such as when Abdirahman proudly tells us:

> In Somalia, lots of young people play football. Everyone wants to become a professional player, that's every boy's dream. There is no club life there. You get together with 15 young people and you buy your own shirts, and then we divide the bib numbers. We organize ourselves. We play friends against friends, or neighbourhood against neighbourhood.

Almost universally, football had been their priority leisure activity from an early age, as both players and fans. This sense of belonging to the game is an important motivator for the young men to continue their football engagement after resettlement.

The different modes of engagement with the game among AFT participants intersect with different spheres of belonging: belonging to the homeland (Somalia), transnational belonging (to Somali diaspora), and belonging to the Netherlands (Spaaij & Broerse, 2018). They appear to be more consciously aware of their Somali identity and culture during the AFT. This sense of belonging is deliberately performed and supported during the event through the use of Somali language, national symbols (e.g. Somali flags and football uniforms), music, and food (Spaaij & Broerse, 2019). For example, Roble, a Dutch Somali player in his late teens, expresses how 'having Somalis together is important. All those people who you see there, it makes you feel like a real Somali, so to speak'. When asked how that experience affects his sense of belonging, he states:

> As a Somali, quite a lot actually. 'Coz most people [at AFT] are Somalis so you learn how to deal with your own culture. The last time I was in Somalia was eight years ago. When I'm over there, I can quite easily regain the Somali language or culture, it brings back the memory.

This sense of belonging is profoundly transnational and strongly associated with diaspora formation. During the event, participants encounter and share space with other Somali-background people living in various parts of Europe. These encounters are typically fleeting, but at times more durable, contributing to a sense of belonging to the global Somali diaspora. This resonates with Burdsey's (2006) finding that sports clubs or events can act as cultural intermediaries between the homeland and the dispersed diasporic community. Roble and others have participated in, and helped to organise, diasporic sports events in other European countries. A Somali Finnish visitor to AFT says of the meaning of such encounters:

> It's always nice to meet other people from other countries. I guess that when we see some youngsters from different countries and you chat with them, and you ask where they are originally from, and some people are born and raised here in Europe. And there are some people who have gone back to Somalia and they have their own story, and it's quite fascinating to hear each story of everyone . . . I think it's very important because even though we have the same culture, you see some differences when you talk to like another Somali who came from a different country . . . like when you start to talk to him you see some little differences.

Given the particular nature of AFT as a diasporic leisure event, it is unsurprising that it evokes in its participating youth a sense of belonging to homeland and to diasporic community. In this regard, it co-exists with other modes of engagement, such as club-based and informal participation, which do not tend to evoke similarly potent feelings of belonging to homeland or diaspora. The narratives of Dutch Somalis like Adbirahman and Roble suggest that the football they participate in can simultaneously elicit belonging to both homeland and the country of settlement. Rather than being juxtaposed as either supporting or challenging integration, their engagement in multiple modes of football creates space for hybrid and plural forms of belonging. Their embodied histories of moving with the ball act as resources for accessing and negotiating these multiple situated forms of belonging.

Discussion and conclusion

What emerges in all three case studies is a multifaceted and multiscalar relationship with football. They evidence the power of sport to foster a range of connections and attachments that include micro-level encounters with people and place, ethnic and pan-ethnic community formation and maintenance, and participation in transnational communities of fandom. Extending from the individual and informal practices of newly arrived young people in an emerging community to the organised activities of well-established refugee diasporas, football provides a sustained – and sustaining – sphere of belonging for many refugee-background individuals and communities.

The empirical evidence reported in this article suggests that much of the most important belonging work occurring in the football sphere is in informal and community contexts outside of institutional and governmental domains. It involves young people negotiating place and relationality through, for instance, kicking a ball on the street or watching football with peers, or playing with co-ethnic youth at informal community leisure events. Rather than being recruited to a

football programme based on being a refugee (or having a refugee background), football is often an opportunity to reconfigure identity and belonging beyond the refugee label, and outside of the governmental gaze; that is, an opportunity to be engaged based on passions, self-expression, pleasures, skills, and knowledge, not deficits or risks (De Martini Ugolotti, 2020; Mata-Codesal et al., 2015; Spaaij & Oxford, 2018). Moreover, rather than being a tool for integration provided by members of the receiving community, football is a resource for belonging that many young people bring with them on their refugee journeys and draw on during displacement and resettlement as a valued source of continuity, connection, confidence, and comfort (Dukic et al., 2017; Lewis, 2015).

It is important to acknowledge, however, that football – as both its own sphere of belonging and a resource for supporting belonging in other spheres – is unevenly distributed. In particular, it privileges young, able-bodied men. As noted earlier, the empirical data presented in this article focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on young men's experiences. The findings from Football Empowerment in particular highlight both the gendered nature of refugee-background young people's experiences, and the opportunities for belonging for young women in football. Yet even for young men, claims of belonging through football are unevenly recognised in refugee-receiving societies, mediated by highly classed, racialised, gendered, and autochthonic politics of (non) belonging in both institutions and local communities (Luguetti et al., 2021; Spracklen et al., 2015; Stone, 2018). This does not diminish its value, but significantly limits its reach. We do not seek, therefore, to present an unequivocally positive account of the role of football for refugee-background young people's (non)belongings. Rather, we aim to encourage a fuller consideration of the multiple football-related practices and relations in the lives of these young people.

Drawing on three studies of refugee-background young people's engagement with football across diverse national, ethno-cultural and resettlement contexts, this article provides new insights into how football can function as a mobile, transnational sphere of belonging. It extends existing research on sport and belonging among refugee-background young people by demonstrating how affective, embodied, and sociocultural belonging to the *practice* of football – including co-existent engagement with community sport, kicking around, and fandom – can serve as a resource for belonging to multiple, multi-scalar places and communities. It thus highlights the myriad ways in which football both precedes and exceeds integration in the everyday lives of some refugee-background young people. The rich and complex engagements with football presented in this article challenge the tendency in both research and practice for sport as integration programmes to be viewed in isolation. On the contrary, their very power is located in the fact that sport is embedded in past and contemporary leisure practices. We argue that attending to the diversity and longevity of football engagement among refugee-background young people can both contextualise and inform formal integration interventions and evidence the wider role that sport and leisure can play in fostering belonging.

Note

1. All studies received ethics approval from relevant institutions (*Dispersed Belongings*: Durham University; *Football Empowerment*: Victoria University; *Amsterdam Futsal Tournament*: University of Amsterdam). All participants provided informed consent and have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge GemArts, Gateshead Council and youth artist-researchers for their collaboration on the Dispersed Belongings project, Loy Singehebhuye and the young people involved in Football Empowerment, and Himilo Relief and Development Association (HIRDA) and Jora Broerse for their support in the Amsterdam Futsal Tournament project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Durham University COFUND International Junior Research Fellowship.

Notes on contributors

Dr Caitlin Nunn is a Research Fellow at the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. Her research is located at the intersection of Refugee Studies and Youth Studies and addresses the lived experiences of refugee-background young people, using qualitative, participatory and arts-based approaches.

Ramon Spaaij is Professor in the Institute for Health and Sport at Victoria University, Australia, and Special Chair of Sociology of Sport at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands. His research addresses sociocultural aspects and impacts of sport, with a focus on diversity, social inclusion and violence.

Carla Luguetti is Lecturer and Research Fellow in the Institute for Health and Sport at Victoria University, Australia, and an expert in sport pedagogy and social justice. Her work focuses on activist approaches within sport and physical education context, in collaboration with researchers and practitioners from all over the world.

ORCID

Ramón Spaaij http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1260-3111
Carla Luguetti http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9442-1636

References

Amara, M., Aquilina, D., Argent, E., Betzer-Tayar, M., Green, M., Henry, I., . . . Taylor, J. (2004). *The roles of sport and education in the social inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees: An evaluation of policy and practice in the UK*. Loughborough University.

Anthias, F. (2009). Translocational belonging, identity and generation: Questions and problems in migration and ethnic studies. *Finnish Journal of Ethnicity and Migration*, *4*(1), 6–15. http://etmu.fi/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/FJEM_1_2009.pdf

Back, L., Sinha, S., & Bryan, W. C. (2012). New hierarchies of belonging. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *15*(2), 139–154. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549411432030

Baker-Lewton, A., Sonn, C., Vincent, D. N., & Curnow, F. (2017). 'I haven't lost hope of reaching out . . . ': Exposing racism in sport by elevating counternarratives. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *21*(11), 1097–1112. http://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1350316

Burdsey, D. (2006). No ball games allowed? A Socio-historical examination of the development and social significance of British Asian football clubs.". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *32*(3), 477–496. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830600554841

Chopra, V., & Dryden-Peterson, S. (2020). Borders and belonging: Displaced Syrian youth navigating symbolic boundaries in Lebanon. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, *18*(4), 449–463. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2020.1744428

Correa-Velez, I., Gifford, S. M., & Barnett, A. G. (2010). Longing to belong: Social inclusion and wellbeing among youth with refugee backgrounds in the first three years in Melbourne, Australia. *Social Science & Medicine*, *71*(8), 1399–1408. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2010.07.018

Correa-Velez, I., Gifford, S. M., & McMichael, C. (2015). The persistence of predictors of wellbeing among refugee youth eight years after resettlement in Melbourne, Australia. *Social Science & Medicine*, *142*, 163–168. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.08.017

De Martini Ugolotti, N. (2015). Climbing walls, making bridges: Children of immigrants' identity negotiations through capoeira and parkour in Turin. *Leisure Studies*, *34*(1), 19–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.966746

De Martini Ugolotti, N. (2020). Music-making and forced migrants' affective practices of diasporic belonging. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1790344

Dukic, D., McDonald, B., & Spaaij, R. (2017). Being able to play: Experiences of social inclusion and exclusion within a football team of people seeking asylum. *Social Inclusion*, *5*(2), 101. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v5i2.892

Erdal, M. B., & Oeppen, C. (2013). Migrant balancing acts: Understanding the interactions between integration and transnationalism. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *39*(6), 867–884. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.765647

Gibbs, L., & Block, K. (2017). Promoting social inclusion through sport for refugee-background youth in Australia: Analysing different participation models. *Social Inclusion*, *5*(2), 91–100. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v5i2.903
Harwood, G., Sendall, M. C., Heesch, K. C., & Brough, M. (2020). A Bourdieusian analysis exploring the meaning of sport for young women from refugee backgrounds in an Australian state high school. *Sport, Education and Society*, *26*(2), 175–187. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2019.1710697
Jeanes, R., O' Connor, J., & Alfrey, L. (2015). Sport and the resettlement of young people from refugee backgrounds in Australia. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *39*(6), 480–500. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723514558929
Lanfranchi, P., & Taylor, M. (2001). *Moving with the ball: The migration of professional footballers*. Berg.
Lewis, H. (2015). Music, dancing and clothing as belonging and freedom among people seeking asylum in the UK. *Leisure Studies*, *34*(1), 42–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.966744
Ley, C., Karus, F., Wiesbauer, L., Rato Barrio, M., & Spaaij, R. (2021). Health, integration and agency: Sport participation experiences of asylum seekers. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa081
Luguetti, C., Singehebhuye, L., & Spaaij, R. (2021). 'Stop mocking, start respecting': An activist approach meets African Australian refugee-background young women in grassroots football. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2021.1879920
Luguetti, C., Singehebhuye, L., & Spaaij, R. (2020). Towards a culturally relevant sport pedagogy: Lessons learned from African Australian refugee-background coaches in grassroots football. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1865905
Malkki, L. (1995). Refugees and exile: From 'refugee studies' to the national order of things. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *24*(1), 495–523. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.002431
Mata-Codesal, D., Peperkamp, E., & Tiesler, N.-C. (2015). Migration, migrants and leisure: Meaningful leisure? *Leisure Studies*, *34*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2015.992620
May, V. (2013). *Connecting self to society: Belonging in a changing world*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
McDonald, B., Spaaij, R., & Dukic, D. (2019). Moments of social inclusion: Asylum seekers, football and solidarity. *Sport in Society*, *22*(6), 935–949. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1504774
Ndofor-Tah, C., Strang, A., Phillimore, J., Morrice, L., Michael, L., Wood, P., & Simmons, J. (2019). *Home office indicators of integration framework 2019* (Third ed.). Home Office.
Nunn, C. (2014). Introduction: The belonging issue. *New Scholar: An International Journal of the Humanities, Creative Arts and Social Sciences*, *3*(1), i-vi. https://dro.dur.ac.uk/17011/
Nunn, C. (2018). *Dispersed Belongings: A Participatory Arts-Based Study of Experiences of Resettled Refugee Young People in Regional Cities in Australia and the United Kingdom. A Report for Project Partners*. Manchester Centre for Youth Studies.
Nunn, C., Gifford, S., McMichael, C., & Correa-Velez, I. (2017). Navigating precarious terrains: Reconceptualizing refugee-youth settlement. *Refuge*, *33*(2), 45–55. https://doi.org/10.7202/1043062ar
Oliver, K. L., & Oesterreich, H. A. (2013). Student-centered inquiry as curriculum as a model for field based teacher education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *45*(3), 394–417. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2012.719550
Palmer, C. (2009). Soccer and the politics of identity for young Muslim refugee women in South Australia. *Soccer and Society*, *10*(1), 27–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970802472643
Riessman, C. K. (2011). What's different about narrative inquiry? Cases, categories and contexts. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research* (pp. 310–330). Sage.
Robinson, D. B., Robinson, I. M., Currie, V., & Hall, N. (2019). The Syrian Canadian Sports Club: A community-based participatory action research project with/for Syrian Youth Refugees. *Social Sciences*, *8*(6), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8060163
Saharso, S. (2019). Who needs integration? Debating a central, yet increasingly contested concept in migration studies. *Comparative Migration Studies*, *7*(1), 16. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0123-9
Schinkel, W. (2018). Against 'immigrant integration': For an end to neo-colonial knowledge production. *Comparative Migration Studies*, *6*(1), 31. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-018-0095-1
Smets, K. (2018). The way Syrian refugees in Turkey use media: Understanding 'connected refugees' through a non-media-centric and local approach. *Communications*, *43*(1), 113–123. https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2017-0041
Spaaij, R. (2012). Beyond the playing field: Experiences of sport, social capital and integration among Somalis in Australia. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *35*(9), 1519–1538. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.592205
Spaaij, R. (2015). Refugee youth, belonging and community sport. *Leisure Studies*, *34*(3), 303–318. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.893006
Spaaij, R., & Oxford, S. (2018). SDP and forced displacement. In H. Collison, S. Darnell, R. Giulianotti, & P. D. Howe (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of sport and development and peace* (pp. 385–395). Routledge.
Spaaij, R., & Broerse, J. (2018). Sport and the politics of belonging: The experiences of Australian and Dutch Somalis. In C. Sonn & N. Oke (Eds.), *Places of privilege: Interdisciplinary perspectives on identities, change and resistance* (pp. 105–122). Brill.
Spaaij, R., & Broerse, J. (2019). Diaspora as aesthetic formation: Community sports events and the making of a Somali Diaspora. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *45*(5), 752–769. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1427052

Spaaij, R., Broerse, J., Oxford, S., Luguetti, C., McLachlan, F., McDonald, B., Klepac, B., Lymbery, L., Bishara, J., & Pankowiak, A. (2019). Sport, refugees, and forced migration: A critical review of the literature. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, *1*, 47. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2019.00047

Spracklen, K., Long, J., & Hylton, K. (2015). Leisure opportunities and new migrant communities: Challenging the contribution of sport. *Leisure Studies*, *34*(1), 114–129. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.939989

Stanfill, M., & Valdivia, A. N. (2017). (Dis)locating nations in the World Cup: Football fandom and the global geopolitics of affect. *Social Identities*, *23*(1), 104–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2016.1157466

Stone, C. (2018). Utopian community football? Sport, hope and belongingness in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. *Leisure Studies*, *37*(2), 171–183. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2017.1329336

Theodorakis, N., Wann, D., Chadwick, S., & Akindes, G. (2019). Attitudes and consumption behaviors of football fans in the Middle-East. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, *42*(2), 225–250. https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&u=mmucal5&id=GALE|A588472246&v=2.1&it=r&sid=bookmark-ITOF&asid=c985fd5b

UNHCR. (2013). *The integration of resettled refugees: Essentials for establishing a resettlement programme and fundamentals for sustainable resettlement programmes*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Walseth, K. (2006). Sport and belonging. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *41*(3–4), 447–464. https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690207079510

Wann, D., Hackathorn, J., & Sherman, M. (2017). Testing the team identification-social psychological health model: Mediational relationships among team identification, sport fandom, sense of belonging, and meaning in life. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, *21*(2), 94–107. https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000066

Yuval-Davis, N. (2011). *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*. Sage.

Zetter, R. (2007). More labels, fewer refugees: Remaking the refugee label in an era of globalization. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *20*(2), 172–192. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem011